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DE RUEHLB #0396/01 0960805
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4593
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3630
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3830
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000396

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO ACTING A/S WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/31/2019

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: SUGGESTED USG MESSAGING IN THE RUN-UP TO
THE JUNE 7 ELECTIONS

REF: BEIRUT 305

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) With two months to go before the June 7 parliamentary elections, the race remains too close to call. Both the majority March 14 coalition and the Hizballah-led opposition express confidence that they will win. In the key Christian swing districts, nervous voters are looking to see who can best protect their interests. Some observers believe recent U.S. overtures to Syria and Iran may rekindle Lebanese fears that a regional "deal" will be made at Lebanon's expense, and that the U.S. will "abandon" Lebanon. Recent Embassy and Washington media outreach continues to be effective in tamping down these concerns. Nonetheless, we can expect that the Hizballah-led alliance will try to exploit these fears to pry voters away from March 14. Hizballah's Christian ally Michel Aoun, still claiming to represent the majority of Lebanese Christians, already is pointing to recent U.S. engagement in the region as evidence that his approach -- allying with Hizballah and cultivating relationships with Syria and Iran -- is best for Lebanon.

¶2. (C) It appears we have cleared our first hurdle, reassuring Lebanese moderates that U.S. engagement with Syria will not come at Lebanon's expense. However, we need to continue to reiterate our support for Lebanese sovereignty and independence, as well as the need for the June 7 parliamentary elections to occur on time, free from intimidation or violence, to quell those voices who are trying to plant doubt in the minds of voters about the U.S. commitment to Lebanon.

¶3. (C) We should take our message a step further and continue to spell out the U.S. position on Hizballah, given that the U.S. has designated Hizballah as both a Specially Designated Terrorist (SDT) organization and Specially Designated Global Terrorist organization under Executive Orders 12947 and ¶13224. While such messaging will not impact either committed March 14 or opposition supporters, it could make the difference among undecided voters in critical Christian areas. The recent UK decision to resume contacts with some elements of Hizballah, which many in Lebanon erroneously believe would not have occurred without a green light from Washington, and which they interpret to suggest that a change in U.S. policy vis-a-vis Hizballah is not far behind, makes it especially urgent that we reiterate our position now.

Some fear that President Obama's March 20 message to Iran may embolden opposition voices who will use our engagement to argue that the U.S. will turn its back on moderate forces in Lebanon. Pro-opposition New TV already has concluded that "...now that the issue of a military strike against Iran was blown off...the Lebanese majority lost strong cards they could have used before the elections," while Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun referred to himself and his political allies as "the group who is standing with the winners (i.e., Iran and Syria)."

¶4. (C) Furthermore, Hizballah already appears to have launched an offensive to convince voters that there will be no question of a " Hamas " scenario (i.e., isolation within the international community) if its alliance wins the elections. Citing World Bank and French government sources, Hizballah claims to have received assurances from the international community that its legitimacy will be recognized. Hizballah MP Mohamad Raad claims "Western countries are knocking our doors one after the other in order to have dialogue with us." At the same time, Hizballah is attempting to paint the U.S. as the only country unwilling to accept its legitimacy.

¶5. (C) Of course, we should steer clear of any messages that hint or suggest U.S. interference in the Lebanese elections. Our public messaging therefore should be positive, stressing continuing U.S. willingness to engage and assist moderate Lebanese leadership, while at the same time underscoring the U.S. position on Hizballah.

¶6. (C) Post is incorporating the following themes into public
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outreach and/or private messaging:

-- (Public) U.S. policy on Hizballah remains firm: we will not deal with Hizballah, which we view as a terrorist organization whose political and military wings are intertwined. There are long-standing U.S. legal prohibitions against providing financial and material support to Hizballah and its related organizations. We anticipate the shape of U.S. assistance programs in Lebanon will be evaluated in the context of Lebanon's parliamentary election results and the policies formed by the new Lebanese cabinet.

-- (Public and private) The U.S. will continue to support moderates in Lebanon who want to live in harmony with all their neighbors and are committed to using diplomatic tools such as UNSCR 1701 to achieve their goals. Diplomacy, not weapons, is the best guarantee of Lebanon's interest (this echoes language in March 14's recently released political program, reftel);

-- (Public and private) The U.S. remains committed to securing a regional peace in the Middle East, including the two-state solution. We want to work with Lebanese leaders who share this vision; Lebanon will play a key role in the long-term effort to build lasting peace and stability in the Middle East.

-- (Public and private) The U.S. remains committed to strengthening Lebanon's state institutions. We are pleased with the results of our robust military and police assistance programs, and intend to continue them with partners who share our objectives of combating terrorism, implementing UNSCR 1701, and expanding the state's authority over all of Lebanon's territory (alluding to Hizballah's state-within-a-state status);

-- (Public) The U.S. reiterates its call for free, fair and transparent elections in Lebanon. We will be watching the elections closely, and hold accountable those who seek to impose their will through political intimidation or violence.

-- (Public and private) The composition of the next

government should be made by the Lebanese themselves; the shape of U.S. assistance programs to Lebanon will be evaluated in the context of Lebanon's parliamentary election results and the policies formed by the new cabinet;

-- (Public) Now that the Special Tribunal for Lebanon is operational, Lebanese citizens will want to elect a government that is committed to cooperating with the Tribunal, putting an end to political assassination of those who stand for Lebanon's sovereignty and independence.

-- (Public and private) The election of moderate forces committed to the rule of law and a free-market economy will open the door to Lebanon's potential for growth and prosperity. Conversely, the election of those who resort to violence to achieve their goals could have repercussions on the Lebanese economy;

-- (Private) The election of moderate forces intent on Lebanon's playing a peaceful role in the region makes a repeat of the 2006 war with Israel less likely, and will strengthen U.S. efforts to secure Israel cooperation on issues such as Sheba'a Farms, Ghajar, and implementation of UNSCR 1701. Conversely, the election of those parties who continue to be hostile to Israel may make it more difficult for the U.S. and UNIFIL to convince the Israelis to exercise restraint in times of conflict, such as the recent Gaza crisis;

-- (Public) Regardless of which side wins the June 7 elections, the defeated parties should accept the outcome and not seek, either through violence or intimidation, to impose constraints not provided in the Constitution. (Note: No party should be able to prevent the legitimate functioning of the government through an automatic veto. Under the 2008

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Doha agreement, the majority March 14 coalition agreed to give the opposition such a veto through a blocking third in the current cabinet. Hizballah is now insisting that this be incorporated into the next government, arguing that Lebanon must be ruled by consensus and no confessional group can be excluded, something March 14 leaders oppose. End note).

17. (C) In addition, the U.S. should:

-- Encourage moderate Arab states (Egypt, UAE, Jordan, Saudi Arabia), especially those who are providing military assistance to Lebanon, and the EU to send the same messages outlined above;

-- Encourage the international community as a whole, including the UN Security Council, to continue to call for free and fair elections, free from intimidation and violence (a similar full-court press effort in 2005 overcame efforts to postpone the 2005 elections); and

-- Encourage visiting CODELS to Lebanon and Syria to reiterate U.S. support for Lebanon's independence and sovereignty, and call for free and fair elections, free from intimidation and violence. (In Syria, codels and other visitors should stress that the U.S. is watching the Lebanese elections closely; if they occur free from intimidation and violence, we will view this as further evidence of Syria's commitment to an independent Lebanon.)

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